

Tony Kelso paints a picture of the 'Mauve Decade' of the 1890s in Duxbury

Town Historian presents at Duxbury Senior Center breakfast

By Mary McKenzie
Clipper Reporter

While most of us have heard the expression "Roaring 20s," you may not have heard the term "Mauve Decade."

But in addition to the term "Gay 90's," the decade of 1890-1900 is referred to by that color, which was "developed specifically as a commercial color and was all the rage to wear," town historian Tony Kelso told a packed room at Duxbury Senior Center recently.

As Duxbury residents munched on breakfast and got a look at a fantastic white silk dress* from that era, which has a story of its own, Kelso showed slides of a time of great change – globally and locally.

"This was a time where summer population in Duxbury was increasing and the year-round population was decreasing," Kelso said. "The year-round population started to decrease in the 1860s, actually."

To encourage young people who went away to work in Boston or New York to keep their ties to Duxbury, there was an annual summer celebration in town called "Old Home Week," Kelso said. This was marked by a largely attended service at First Parish Church, as well as other churches in town, and by a picnic.

Using photos from local photographers, tourism booklets and magazines to give people a picture of the era, Kelso noted that there was a divide between what on the surface "appeared fun and carefree" for the more well-to-do

summer residents and tourists visiting the hotels and boarding houses, and the people of Duxbury who were working in those hotels and providing services for them.

"While these hotels may not live up to our modern idea of luxury, at the time they were considered to be luxurious," Kelso said, showing pictures of hotels and boarding houses from that time. "But there is a big difference between the lives of those here on vacation, and the maids who had a tiny backroom to sleep in. And there were a lot of Duxbury people working in those hotels. The picture is a lot more nuanced than the term "Gay 90s" suggests."

What created the attraction for summer living in Duxbury?

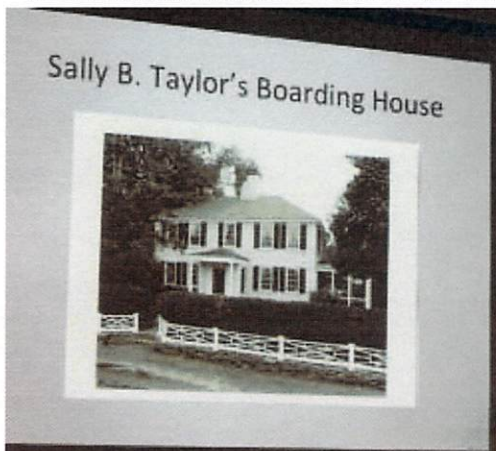
"The big development, of course, was the train," said Kelso. "The Old Colony train line could get you to Boston in a little over an hour if everything went right, although there in were frequently issues with weather and tides."

Kelso showed slides of local homes, which were often turned into boarding houses the summer.

"It was a big economic engine to get people in and out of Boston and get local produce up to Boston for sale," he added, noting that Duxbury residents sent their produce up on the first morning trains to get to Boston marketplaces.



Town Historian Tony Kelso spoke about Duxbury in the 1890s as well as the popular "mauve" color for clothing.



There were three stations in Duxbury – Millbrook on St. George Street, Island Creek on Park Street and South Station off Depot Street.

Kelso said that although all the local South Shore towns on Old Colony line – Scituate, Marshfield, Cohasset, etc. – contributed funds to maintain the railroad, it never made money.

In 1893, the Old Colony line was bought by the New York-New Haven-Hartford Railroad. It stopped running in 1939.

Current town residents may not think there is much evidence left of the trains that used to run in Duxbury, but Kelso pointed to an old picture of the Alden House Historic Site taken from the train tracks. He explained: “It is hard to imagine past the woods that have grown where the train tracks were, but there is a depression in the ground in the wooded area next to the Alden House that lets you know exactly where the tracks used to be.”

Rebounding from a Recession/ Depression

A four-year recession/depression in the 1890s ended in 1897. Kelso pointed to a hold on building homes in town that ended that year as the nation crawled out of the recession/ depression and businesses and citizens could get bank loans again.

This is the era when the Myles Standish Monument, which was started in the 1870s and abandoned due to lack of funds, was finished.

“The monument was completed in 1898, (but) it was started in 1871,” said Kelso. “It was a tourist attraction in an era when people were gaining interest in the colonial times.”

The French-Atlantic Cable Company, which had come to Duxbury in 1869 and occupied a former bank building, had created some new jobs, too. Although it was hoped that the cable company would bring many jobs, “it really only brought a few,” said Kelso. “Although there were a few families who moved here from England and France, it really was not the economic boom it was hoped to be.”

A man who Kelso pointed to as “emblematic” of the lifestyles of many Duxbury residents of that time is Seaborn Wadsworth.

Seaborn was born on a ship in the Bay of Bengal in 1853; his father Alexander was a ship captain and his mother, Beulah Holmes, died delivering him before the captain could get the boat to shore. Because the baby needed to eat and his mother had died, he would have needed a wet nurse – or a woman who was hired to nurse babies – but the ship was stuck for weeks in the bay in “becalmed waters” so there was no movement and no way to find a woman to take care of the infant.

To feed the baby, sailors soaked pieces of bread in beer and put the mixture into a cloth so the baby could suck on it. He thrived. Once they got to India, the captain was able to get his wife into a coffin (while they were stuck in the water he had her “pickled” in bourbon to keep the body intact until she could be buried in Duxbury), and he hired a wet nurse.

But it wasn’t long till the wet nurse became violently seasick and grew incapable of nursing the baby boy.

“It was up to these sailors again,” said Kelso. “And they went back to the bread mixed in beer through a cloth.”

Like his father, Seaborn was a sailor and worked delivering



The clothing and textile committee of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society provided an 1890s silk dress that would have been worn at a party. Note the size of the small waist.

cargo around the world. Once he was back in Duxbury, Seaborn Wadsworth married Lizzie Ballard and had two children. On land, he worked as a real estate agent, sold insurance, worked as a handyman and helped people open and close their summer cottages. He was a jack of all trades, Kelso noted.

“Seaborn did what needed to be done when there was a need for it, like many of the people of that time, who were carving out a life in a changing landscape,” he said. “A lot of people in Duxbury made money turning homes and properties into places for the summer.” For example, Powder Point



There was a good crowd at the Duxbury Senior Center for breakfast to hear Tony Kelso speak.

Photos by Julius A. Prince, Jr.

Hall was a school from September to May and turned into a place for visitors to rent a room in the summer.

“A lot of families who visited here started out by going to those boarding houses and then eventually bought a home here or built one as their summer house,” he said.

One of those places was the St. George Hotel on the corner of Washington Street and Sunset Road. Run by George Scott, it offered a “hot meal no matter what time you came in,” said Kelso.

Scott, who was a black man from Washington, D.C., had come up to Boston and worked as a waiter. He became friends with members of Duxbury’s Delano family and decided to marry and settle here.

“George Scott was incorporated into the fabric of Duxbury. There was never a hint of prejudice,” Kelso said. “He had a successful business and was well regarded in the community.”

Of course, one of the really well-known hotels from that time is the Myles Standish.

“It was considered quite posh,” said Kelso. “A large summer hotel with surrounding cottages.”

The Boyer family of New York bought the property in 1894 and New York City families started coming up to stay in the hotel. “They would stay for a month or two,” Kelso said.

The “Mauve Decade” was really the beginning of what would become a tourism industry in Duxbury. “Duxbury hadn’t quite taken off as a summer destination in the 1890s. It really started in the 1900s,” he said. “Really after World War I brought the big boom of vacationers to Duxbury.”

**About the white dress: The 1890s white silk dress on display was made by a dressmaker “for a woman of some means” and worn by her maid Mary O’Leary when she got married at Holy Family Church in the 1920s. Kelso said that is where the mystery of the dress begins. “The old Holy Family Church was built in the 1930s, although there were services around town before that, particularly in the summer months. And when you do some digging, there were many Mary O’Learys in Massachusetts in the 1920s, so it’s hard to trace the story. There is a mystery there.”*